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ABSTRACT

The freshman composition course at Mayville State College (North Dakota) progresses from basic grammar to sentence combining to the development of expository writing skills based on the principles of generative rhetoric. The course begins with a brief review of grammar, emphasizing the phrase, clause, and sentence, and then moves on to the process of sentence combining. The next phase of the course introduces generative rhetoric, including the cumulative sentence, the general idea stated in the base clause, and the more specific details developed in the phrases and clauses of the lower levels, either coordinately or subordinately. Once students have grasped this idea, they begin to work with constructions that authors commonly use, including the noun phrase, the absolute, and the verbal phrase. Constant writing assignments serve to strengthen the skills they have learned. Once they have mastered sentence construction, they then apply the same principles of construction to the development of paragraphs. They learn to take a single word or idea, add several coordinate or subordinate ideas to produce a good sentence, and then to expand this sentence into a paragraph. After learning to write a good paragraph, they are taught how to apply the skills to answering essay test questions from other disciplines. The course concludes with an introduction to reading fiction and poetry, with an emphasis on authors' use of variety in sentence structure. (FL)

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Generative Rhetoric-Sentence Combining: A New Approach to Expository Writing.

John Landwehr

The program I want to describe is the freshman composition course we are currently using at Mayville State College.

We have found that it is necessary to begin with a two to three week review of grammar. If students are to be taught to write contemporary prose style, it is essential that they have a good concept of the phrase, the clause, and the sentence.

Our next step is to introduce them to the concept of sentence combining. We spend several days at this; it is a nice way to loosen the students up in the beginning. Also we are going to come back to this concept of combining ideas repeatedly as we work through the cumulative sentences.

We then begin with the concept of the cumulative sentence: the main idea expressed in the base clause, the more detailed information expressed in the free modifiers. We use examples constantly:

The tired and lonely old man with arthritis sat in the rocking chair.

The old man sat in the rocking chair, tired, lonely, his bones aching with arthritis.

The slender, green eyed brunette wearing a stylish denim outfit walked into the room.

The girl walked into the room, a slender, green eyed brunette wearing a stylish denim outfit.

In these two examples both sentences are correct and say the same thing, but the second version is the cumulative sentence. We also illustrate this with examples from contemporary writers.

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In the sink lay a big frozen fish, a vicious-looking thing marked like a snake.

J.F. Powers.

The apartment was on the top floor -- a small living-room, a small dining-room, a small bedroom, and a bath.

F. Scott Fitzgerald.

Supporting all society is the peasant, the poorest and most necessary of men.

Will Durant.

Down below were the gardens, bare now but beautifully regular, the gravel paths, the trees [illegible] stone wall by the lake and the lake in the sunlight with t[illegible]ountains beyond.

Ernest Hemingway.

It (the Union army on the march) came out of a blue rainstorm in the east and overflowed the narrow valley road, coiling along a stream, narrowing and choking a white bridge, fading out into the yellowish dust of June but still visible on the farther road beyond the blue hills, spiked with flags and guidons like a great chopped bristly snake, the snake ending headlessly in a blue wall of summer rain.

Michael Shaara.

We then begin with the mechanics of constructing the cumulative sentence. This begins with the idea of the base clause, including any bound modifiers it may contain, and then the free modifiers. These are either initial, medial or final. We use the simple numbering system devised by Francis Christensen. The following are examples of the base clause:

Sentence	Base Clause
The older boy read a book.	The older boy read a book.
The boy read the book because he had a test the next day.	The boy read a book because he had a test the next day.
The scholarly boy read a fascinating history book.	The scholarly boy read a fascinating history book.
The boy would read a book, if the library was open.	The boy would read a book.
The boy read a book, a history book that was fascinating.	The boy read a book.
The boy, a really good student, read a book.	The boy read a book.

Initial free modifiers are those that come before the base clause whether they are set off by a comma or not.

2 *If the rain continues,*

1 the picnic will be cancelled.

2 *When the sun is going down,*

1 the view is spectacular.

2 *Yesterday*

1 he drove the car to town.

Medial free modifiers are those which come between the subject and the predicate, and they are set off by commas

1 Jason,/, is the lifeguard.

2/*the one who saved my life*

Final free modifiers are those that follow the base clause, set off by a comma or some other form of punctuation.

1 Jason is the lifeguard,

2 *the one who saved my life.*

This simple numbering system helps the student see the relationships of the various modifiers to the base clause or to each other if the sentence goes on to lower levels.

Yesterday the old man, *barely able to walk,* went to town, *a distance of three miles from his house.*

2 *Yesterday*

1 the old man,/, went to town,

2/*barely able to walk*

2 *a distance of three miles from his house.*

2 *Yesterday*

1 the old man walked into town,

2 *which was a good three miles from his house,*

3 *a long distance for an old man to walk.*

The next phase of generative rhetoric is very critical. It is the process of getting the student to understand that the cumulative sentence moves from a general statement in the base clause to the more specific details of the idea in the free modifiers, from the whole to the parts, from the plural to the singular. We begin with simple examples with several second level statements that come out of the base clause and then move on to the third and fourth level statements. It is important that they understand that the base clause generates the second level idea, that the second level generates the third level, etc.

1 Going to college for the first time is a great experience,

2 *meeting new and interesting friends,*

2 *learning to live in a dorm,*

2 *discovering the realities of money.*

1 It was a beautiful tree,

2 *the trunk tall and straight,*
2 *the branches drooping down in graceful arcs,*
2 *the roots pushing up the grass around the base.*

1 She was fascinated by the old man dozing in the chair,

2 *the grey head barely bouncing in a nod,*
2 *the thin shoulders drooped,*
2 *the tired chest heaving almost imperceptibly,*
2 *the spindly legs spreading outward.*

1 Dan had a nice thing going for himself,

2 *a good education completed,*
2 *a challenging job that he enjoyed,*
2 *a boss he got along with beautifully.*

1 He stood admiring the old building,

2 *the red tiled roof,*
2 *the ancient red bricks still firm and squat,*
2 *the windows tall and narrow,*
2 *the hand carved doors.*

2 *On their first date*

1 they ended up at the hockey game,

2 *he to enjoy all the barbaric heroism of the stick swinging gladiators,*
2 *she to feign an interest that was not real.*

Once they have mastered the second level modifiers, then it is a rather simple matter to go on with the lower level modifiers and finally the combination of the two forms.

1 It was a grand old building,

2 with two huge front doors,

3 doors which were exquisitely hand carved.

1 There's a log in the hole on the bottom of the sea,

2 with a bump on the log,

3 with a frog on the bump,

4 with a hair on the frog,

5 with a flea on the hair,

(etc.)

1 I thought that high school was an absolute bore,

2 the countless dull classes,

3 which everyone has to take to graduate;

2 the many inane extracurricular activities,

3 which one has to seem enthused about,

4 as though the success of the school depends on winning some stupid game.

1 Father Urban's own opportunities had been all too few and slight:

2 a prayer for use where it was the custom for a clergyman to sign off the station;

2 a series of three-minute talks especially suitable for Lent,

3 these on defective film to which the Order held residual rights;

2 and two appearances "live,"

3 making the Stations of the Cross and participating in a panel discussion of juvenile delinquency,

4 the latter on educational TV.

J.F. Powers

Once they understand the principles of generative rhetoric, we then go through each of the different constructions that can be used in the free modifiers. Some of these they are very familiar with, the relative clause, the subordinate clause; but others, the noun phrase, the absolute, are new to them. The following are the ones we use:

PP Prepositional Phrase

1 The boy ran down the road,

2 *with his dog behind him.*

VP Verbal Phrase

1 The boy ran down the road,

2 *shivering from the cold.*

NP Noun Phrase

1 The boy ran down the road,

2 *a small figure in tattered clothes.*

AA Adjective Series

1 The boy ran down the road,

2 *cold, wet, tense.*

AP Adjective Phrase

1 The boy ran down the road,

2 *cold from the chilly rain.*

ABS Absolute

1 The boy ran down the road,

2 *his body shivering from the cold.*

SC Subordinate Clause

1 The boy ran down the road,

2 *because he was lost.*

RC Relative Clause

1 The boy ran down the road,

2 *which was a dangerous thing to do.*

After they are familiar with the various forms, it is then easy for them to understand some of the complications of good writing. For example, the idea of parallel construction: on the same level, use the same construction; on the lower level, change the construction.

1 He sat at the desk writing a letter,

2 *holding the paper with one hand,*
2 *moving the pen with the other.*

1 He sat at the desk writing a letter,

2 holding the paper with one hand,

3 *a crumpled piece of paper he had salvaged from the trash.*

1 He was a typical Norwegian,

2 *round full face,*
2 *straight blonde hair,*
2 *big boned frame.*

1 He was a typical *Norwegian,*

2 with a round full *face,*

3 a face covered with milk white *skin,*

4 *soft* and fuzzily *firm,*

5 like the texture of a freshly picked *peach.*

Many of the petty problems of writing, punctuation, dangling modifiers, etc. simply disappear once they understand the construction of the cumulative sentence. The next step is to carry the same process into the development of the paragraph. We take a sentence they have been working with and now expand it into a paragraph.

Sentence

1 Going to college for the first time is a great experience.

2 meeting new and interesting friends,

2 learning to live in a dorm,

2 discovering the realities of money.

Simple Paragraph

Each fall thousands of young people attend college for the first time. They have the chance to meet new and interesting friends. They have to adjust to living in a dorm with hundreds of others. They have to learn how to manage their money carefully.

A. Each fall thousands of young people attend college for the first time.

B. They have the chance to meet new and interesting friends.

B. They have to adjust to living in a dorm with hundreds of others.

B. They have to learn how to manage their money carefully.

Expanded Paragraph

Every fall thousands of young people go through an exciting new experience, adjusting to their first year of college life. Perhaps the most interesting part of it all is the chance to meet new friends. The happy-go-lucky extrovert has no problem with this at all; the more reserved may find it difficult to force himself to overcome his shyness and say 'hello.' A second challenge is learning to live in a dorm, especially for the one who had his own room and his privacy at home. The dorm is a different world, a world of chaos, with all of the people, the noise, the constant activity. But, as new and exciting as these two changes are, the real shock of adjusting to college comes after the second week when that big bundle of cash for the first quarter has suddenly dwindled down to a single five, a couple ones, and a small handful of change.

California produces tremendous amounts of fruit. A great deal of technology lies behind this fantastic production, men who are knowledgeable about trees and skillful in caring for them. Some men perfect the seeds and the roots. Others use the skills of chemistry to control insects and disease. Another group of men stand at the borders guarding against the arrival of new pests and new diseases. Still others specialize in grafting new combinations of young trees and vines.

1 Successful fruit farming requires men of knowledge and skill,

2 men who perfect the seeds and roots,

2 men who apply chemicals,

2 men who prevent disease,

2 men who skillfully graft.

Behind the fruitfulness are men of understanding and knowledge and skill, men who experiment with seed, endlessly developing the techniques for greater crops of plants whose roots will resist the million enemies of the earth: the molds, the insects, the rusts, the blights. These men work carefully and endlessly to perfect the seed, the roots. And there are the men of chemistry who spray the trees against pests, who sulphur the grapes, who cut out disease and rots, mildews and sicknesses. Doctors of preventive medicine, men at the borders, who look for fruit flies, for Japanese beetles, men who quarantine the sick trees and root them out and burn them, men of knowledge. The men who graft the young trees, the little vines, are the cleverest of all, for theirs is a surgeon's job, as tender and delicate; and these men must have surgeons' hands and surgeons' hearts to slit the bark, to place the graft, to bind the wounds and cover them from the air. These are great men.

John Steinbeck

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John Steinbeck

1 It was a grand old building,

2 with two huge front doors,

3 doors which were exquisitely hand carved.

A He stood on the sidewalk looking at the old hotel, a grand old building from an era long since gone by. It now stood, precariously, in the middle of an urban renewal site.

B The two huge front doors gave the impression that the building had to have been important with a front entrance such as this, enormous enough to serve the needs of a respectable medieval castle.

C And not only were the doors immense; they were also covered with beautiful carvings, an unending assortment of exquisitely hand carved figures, faces, scrolls, squiggles, circles, all of it giving the impression that some Victorian craftsman just didn't want to stop.

Coda The building may be ready for the wrecker's ball, but at least it is dying with a certain amount of its dignity intact.

We cover the principles of generative rhetoric in our first quarter. The second quarter the students then apply these principles of writing in two areas: the term paper and the essay question. They are given a single word from which they write a cumulative sentence, develope it into a paragraph and then expand it to a complete term paper. At the same time they are given material from other disciplines, art, social science, etc., and answer essay questions on this material following the same principles of working from the cumulative sentence up to the expanded paragraphs.

In the third quarter we give them an introduction to reading fiction, the short story and the novel. We use the Pulitzer Prize winning novel Killer Angels by Michael Shaara which uses the cumulative sentences very effectively. Writing assignments are designed to force them to continue to use the principles of generative writing. The second half of the quarter we do the same with an introduction to poetry.